

Foreword

Nothing else in the nineteenth century seemed as vivid and dramatic a sign of modernity as the railroad. Scientists and statesmen joined capitalists in promoting the locomotive as the engine of 'progress', a promise of imminent Utopia. By the end of the century their naiveté came home to them, especially in the United States where railroad corporations were seen as the epitome of ruthless, irresponsible business power, a grave threat to order and stability, both economic and political. But in fact from its beginnings the railroad was never free of some note of menace, some undercurrent of fear. The popular images of the 'mechanical horse' manifest fear in the very act of seeming to bury it in a domesticating metaphor: fear of displacement of familiar nature by a fire-snorting machine with its own internal source of power. Once it appeared, the machine seemed unrelenting in its advancing dominion over the landscape — in the way it 'lapped the miles', in Emily Dickinson's words — and in little over a generation it had introduced a new system of behavior: not only of travel and communication but of thought, of feeling, of expectation. Neither the general fear of the mechanical and the specific frights of accident and injury, nor the social fear of boundless economic power entirely effaced the Utopian promise implicit in the establishment of *speed* as a new principle of public life. In fact the populations of the industrial world, including the American Populists who aimed their profound hostility toward corporate capitalism at the railroad, accommodated themselves to the sheer physical fact of travel by rail as a normal fact of existence.

Now, as the railroad recedes in importance as a mode of personal travel and of economic distribution, it reappears as an object of study, of historical contemplation. Scholars have weighed its importance in

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the making of industrial capitalism, as transportation and as the business of organization. Not only was its economic function of first importance, but that function exerted itself in many indirect ways upon what seemed to be simple personal needs for getting from one place to another. Personal travel by railroad inevitably (if unconsciously) assimilated the personal traveller into a physical system for moving goods. Behind the railroad's 'annihilation of space by time', wrote Karl Marx, lay the generative phenomenon of capital. The 'creation of the physical conditions of exchange' was 'an extraordinary necessity' for capital, which 'by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier'. Products become commodities only as they enter a market. They must be moved from the factory to the customer. Entering a market requires a movement in space, a 'locational moment'. The industrial system also requires the movement of resources from mine to factory — a movement which is already a transformation of nature. Thus the railroad fulfilled inner necessities of capital, and it is this alone that accounts for its unhindered development in the nineteenth century.

The 'railway journey' which fills nineteenth-century novels as an event of travel and social encounter was at bottom an event of spatial relocation in the service of production. By exposing this hidden nerve within mechanized travel, Wolfgang Schivelbusch has placed the journey by rail in a new and revealing light. It was a decisive mode of initiation of people into their new status within the system of commodity production: their status as object of forces whose points of origin remained out of view. Just as the path of travel was transformed from the road that fits itself to the contours of land to a *railroad* that flattens and subdues land to fit its own needs for regularity, the traveler is made over into a bulk of weight, a 'parcel', as many travelers confessed themselves to feel. Compared to what it replaced, the journey by stage coach, the railway journey produced novel experiences — of self, of fellow-travelers, of landscape (now seen as swiftly-passing panorama), of space and time. Mechanized by seating arrangements and by new perceptual coercions (including new kinds of shock), routinized by schedules, by undeviating pathways, the railroad traveler underwent experiences analagous to military regimentation — not to say to 'nature' transformed into 'commodity'. He was converted from a private individual into one of a mass public — a mere consumer.

This puts too crudely and schematically the form of Schivelbusch's astute analysis. But the brief summary does suggest the special kind of light that flows from his insights. He wishes to recover the subjective

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experience of the railway journey at the very moment of its newness, its pure particularity: to construct from a magnificent display of documents written and graphic what can be called the industrial *subject*. In this enterprise Schivelbusch writes in the spirit of Siegfried Giedion, Walter Benjamin, Norbert Elias and Dolph Sternberger — cultural historians who look for evidence of new forms of consciousness arising out of encounters with new structures, new things. One feature of modernity as it crystallized in the nineteenth century was a radical foregrounding of machinery and of mechanical apparatus within everyday life. The railroad represented the visible presence of modern technology as such. Within the technology lay also forms of social production and their relations. Thus the physical experience of technology mediated consciousness of the emerging social order; it gave a form to a revolutionary rupture with past forms of experience, of social order, of human relation. The products of the new technology produced, as Marx remarked, their own subject; they produced capacities appropriate to their own use. In their railway journeys nineteenth-century people encountered the new conditions of their lives; they encountered themselves as moderns, as dwellers within new structures of regulation and need.

Schivelbusch has undertaken to reconstruct the immediacy of encounter through an extraordinary richness of detail. The book is rich in proportion to its breadth as well as its intensity of concentration. It brings into focus a single system that underlies a diversity of partial facts: the design of under-carriages and cars, compartments and corridors, platforms and waiting rooms. It explores the nodal points of juncture between railroads and cities and shows the effect of the new mode of travel upon traffic circulation and the segregation of urban spaces. It also discloses hidden connections among journeying by railway, walking on city streets and shopping in department stores. It is not only the changes in physical behavior that concern the author — the new demands upon the nerves, for example — but the cultural perceptions and definitions of such changes. The book is itself a kind of journey, from the railway experience to the larger formations of culture within industrial capitalism. It suggests that we look for evidence of culture at those minute points of contact between new things and old habits, and that we include in our sense of history the power of things themselves to impress and shape and evoke a response within consciousness. There is nothing here of nostalgia for a lost 'romance' of the railroad, but a great deal that compels us to conceive of that romance in

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a new way. The book contributes provocatively to a much-needed critical history of the origins of modern industrial culture.

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